

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH PAUL MCHALE, ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR HOMELAND DEFENSE, VIA TELECONFERENCE TIME: 11:45 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2007

Copyright (c) 2007 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.defendamerica.mil for more information.)

MR. MCHALE: And ladies and gentlemen, good morning. This is Paul McHale. How are you? How do you hear me?

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER BROOK DEWALT, USN (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): We've got you loud and clear, sir. Thank you very much for being with us this morning.

MR. MCHALE: Delighted to be here. I regret that we all have to gather around this particular issue but certainly happy to answer your questions.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: All right, sir. Did you have an opening statement for us or are we just going to move right into questions?

MR. MCHALE: No, I'm a recovering politician. I can talk forever. Perhaps the best approach would be to get into -- (audio break). I can certainly -- if you'd like I can certainly provide you a summary but I think if we get into a dialogue we'll probably cover most of the more important points.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Well, Andrew Lubin, you were first online. Once again, I'd like to remind you to please state your name and your publication. So Andrew, why don't you get us started?

Q Thank you. Good morning, Mr. Secretary. Andrew Lubin from U.S. Cavalry ON Point. Appreciate you taking the time with us.

MR. MCHALE: Good morning.

Q Thank you. I guess the big question is the -- we've seen a lot of stuff in the news the past day about the coordination or lack thereof between the national -- California and military helicopters -- (inaudible) -- kind of focuses -- (inaudible) -- after Katrina. Can you talk a bit about that please?

MR. MCHALE: I've not seen any allegations with regard to a lack of coordination among the various military components or in terms of internal coordination related to the speed with which those aircraft were prepared to deploy. The articles that I think you make reference to raise a concern that the military aircraft which were by all accounts promptly provided --

Q Correct.

MR. MCHALE: -- for firefighting purposes may have been delayed in the execution of their mission because of certain requirements that relate to California law and policy deployment of those aircraft. So forgive me, I didn't mean to put too fine a point on your question but I do want to make it clear that at least to date no one has criticized the Department of Defense or the National Guard in terms of the speed with which we deployed our aircraft. Issues had been raised with regard to how quickly those aircraft were employed when they were required to meet the standards -- the applicable standards of California law and policy.

Q Yes, sir. Then I phrased it poorly. No, the helicopters and the C-130s were ready far quicker than anybody expected. That wasn't my point. It's just the coordination between them and California -- most of the fault on the California part. There's no way the DOD can -- (inaudible) -- we don't need a union-based observer? We can just go? You're talking a 24-hour plus delay on these.

MR. MCHALE: This -- the -- specifically what I'm told is the delay, which appears to be real, occurred when spotters were not available to accompany our military helicopters in the execution of their firefighting missions. From the preliminary research that we have done here in contact with our operators that are deployed in southern California would indicate that there is indeed a requirement for a spotter to be aboard a military helicopter before that helicopter engages in firefighting activity, and it does appear to be the case that our helicopters -- some of our helicopters -- were ready to go approximately 24 hours before the spotters became available.

I think the follow-on question should be better addressed to the civilian organizations that had the responsibility to provide those spotters and truly I'm not in a position to comment upon the availability of the spotters or the timeliness with which they were provided. All I can tell you is that our helicopters were deployed very rapidly and as soon as the spotters were made available they began fighting the fires.

Q No, they were good. My son's in Twenty-Nine Palms and they were ready, you know, days before. We'll work on the civilian side. I appreciate the -- (inaudible) -- on that.

MR. MCHALE: And I would hesitate because it -- frankly, I think there is an adverse -- I want to stress unintended adverse implication when we use the word coordination. There wasn't a lack of coordination during the initial military response. There simply were not spotters.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. Brendan?

Q Yes. Good morning, sir. My name is Brendan Monocomb (ph) with the American Pundit. This is my first time doing this so I may get this wrong. My question is actually with regards to the information disseminated about fires with the Iraq -- the war in Iraq. It seems that there are a lot of people even in high-ranking positions like Senator Boxer and the lieutenant governor of California who are under the impression that it's been greatly hindered by the war in Iraq. Has there been any attempt to change that -- that dissemination or --

MR. MCHALE: I certainly can't speak for the officials that you referenced and my comments should not be interpreted as a rebuttal to the

paraphrase of their statements as you presented them. All I can tell you is the simple truth. The military response to the wildfires in California was not inhibited in any way to any degree -- (audio break) -- in Iraq and Afghanistan. The capabilities that we needed in southern California were fully available from our domestic inventory of resources and those capabilities were made available as fast as was humanly possible. Let me just give you some numbers that support that.

Q Thank you.

MR. MCHALE: As of this morning -- I don't have the exact numbers in front of me -- but as of this morning approximately 2,500 National Guardsmen -- most of them in state status, a few in what we call Title XXXII status -- were deployed in firefighting missions. About 350 active duty and civilian DOD personnel were also deployed. There were as of this morning more than 17,000 available National Guardsmen in California who could have been activated and would have been activated if they had been needed.

The platforms that we have utilized were platforms that on a recurring basis we employ for firefighting purposes. The department -- well, the -- there are six modular air mobile firefighting packages.

Those are the inserts that we place in C-130 aircraft and that we see on TV as tankers dropping the orange flame retardant. We have six of those aircraft within the military inventory. Two are in the Air Force Reserve -- six are in the National Guard.

By prior design as part of rotation in and out of the fleet two of those aircraft were down for recurring maintenance. That meant that we had six of the eight available at the time of the California wildfires -- four in the National Guard, two in the Air Force Reserve. All six rapidly deployed to California. All six at this very moment are executing missions in support of firefighting. Of the six, one aircraft -- one out of -- one C-130 out of Wyoming was briefly delayed when -- (audio break) -- maintenance problem -- (audio break) -- broken part and so five were more rapidly deployed and utilized. One was delayed briefly while that part was acquired and installed on the aircraft.

So bottom line, of the six aircraft designed for these missions all six deployed to California and all six are now engaged in firefighting. General Blum -- Lieutenant General Blum, the chief of the guard bureau -- has said previously that at the time that decisions were being made regarding deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, the possibility of wildfires in California was very seriously considered, and through conscious planning the identification of units for deployment was deconflicted for the -- from the anticipated firefighting activities.

And so when our department was asked to provide assistance we in fact had been preparing in anticipation for several days and there was absolutely no degradation of firefighting response because of the overseas deployment and in fact we had considerable capability held in reserve. (Inaudible) -- a specific example -- we have had for about three days now a battalion of Marines at Twenty-Nine Palms on alert ready for possible deployment to the fire line if they were needed. The fact is to this point they've not been needed.

Q Okay. Thank you very much.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Steve? And Steve, you still with us? All right. Sounds like we may have a technical difficulty with Steve Schippert there. Pamela, how about you? Q Yeah, hi. This is Pamela from Atlas Shrugged. Thank you so much for joining me and us. This is somewhat tangential but I know that there's -- that arson's cited in these fires. Has there been any investigation -- any progress in the investigation on who is behind these fires?

MR. MCHALE: I'm not really qualified to answer that. We in the Department of Defense are not related in any way to the identification of the source of the fire. We're too busy fighting it. We provide capability -- (audio break) -- civil support capabilities to assist the first responders, and law enforcement authorities outside the Department of Defense would normally be tasked with the duty of identifying the cause of the fire.

Q Okay.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: All right. And Matt?

Q Hi. Matt Meara (ph), ThreatsWatch. Sir, just wanted to get your general thoughts on the TOPOFF 4 exercise last weekend and how you thought that went and various observations you might have from that exercise.

MR. MCHALE: Appreciate that question. Obviously, we're all dealing with the more immediate challenge of wildfires but I think that's a great question. I thought TOPOFF went well both in terms of the execution of consequence management activities during TOPOFF and, to be very candid, the identification of capabilities that need to be improved. The scenario in TOPOFF involved the near simultaneous detonation of dirty bombs in geographically distinct locations. The first one was detonated in Guam followed by two others in Portland, Oregon and Phoenix, Arizona. The scenario was very real and certainly is within the scope of our enemies' intent if they are able to acquire the material and the expertise to construct such weapons.

So the major takeaway for the Department of Defense was a recognition combined with an increased sense of urgency that we need to be able to respond to these kinds of attacks not just with general utility forces but more importantly with military forces that had been specifically trained in (C burn ?) response. We now have 52 certified civil support teams within the National Guard. We are building toward a capacity of 17 what are called CERF-Ps modeled on the Marine Corps' chemical biological incident response force, again, within the National Guard.

And lastly, we are in the process of task organizing multiple large joint task forces with a combined personnel roster in excess of 15,000 in order to respond rapidly and effectively specially trained forces to any domestic attack of the type reflected in the TOPOFF scenario within the U.S. homeland. And so TOPOFF I thought was challenging, largely reassuring in terms of our improving capabilities, but also sobering in terms of what kind of capacity we need to achieve. Q Thank you.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: All right. Thank you, sir. Steve, did you get back up with us?

Q Yes, sir.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Okay. And go ahead.

Q Mr. McHale, thank you for your time this morning.

MR. MCHALE: Steve, glad to be with you.

Q This is Steve Schippert with ThreatsWatch. My question kind of flies between the California situation and the question that Matt just asked, and it's regarding military reserve readiness.

MR. MCHALE: Yeah -- yeah.

Q The Air Force has a program -- a reserve technician program where reservists essentially hold civil service positions that mirrors their military skills and training.

MR. MCHALE: I'm very familiar with it.

Q Right. And when they -- they essentially swap their civilian clothes for their uniforms when they go to drill. My question is do you think an expanded program of that nature -- one that would maybe encompass more of the reserve component -- would perhaps be a way to boost readiness and improve interagency cooperation in a crisis both at a federal, a state, or even local security and disaster response?

MR. MCHALE: Steve, at the risk of flattering you let me truly say what a terrific question, and using your question as a springboard let me describe something that we have been advocating for some time within the interagency, and let me assure you that we will continue to advocate this approach with a sense of urgency and real tenacity. Not many people are all that familiar with the technician program that you have just described but I've been familiar with it -- I and everyone in my office have been familiar with it for quite some time. And using that very consciously as a model -- (audio break) -- approach to intergovernmental coordination has been advocated by my office.

Here's what I think we ought to do in order to better integrate federal, state, and local planning, public and private sector, military and civilian capabilities to ensure a unified response to a catastrophic event. We've come up with -- I've testified before the Congress on this issue -- we've come up with a concept that we call a task force for emergency response -- a TFER. And it's modeled on a similar program that was originally established in Onslow County, North Carolina. In Onslow County, Jacksonville, and the co-located Marine Corps base Camp Lejeune entered into an agreement for what they called a military civilian task force for emergency response -- a MCTFER. We've simply shortened that to TFER. And it's an organization that has a standing staff and planning requirement to integrate military and civilian capabilities in response to a disaster.

So we took that as a model and we began to develop a concept that would integrate these capabilities nationwide. I think there should be a task force for emergency response in every state.

I further believe that the day-to-day leader or chairman of that task force for emergency response should be the adjutant general of the state. The staff of that task force for emergency response should be modeled on the technician program that gave -- (audio break) -- question.

Q Right.

MR. MCHALE: To that end, National Guard planners who are drilling guardsmen on the weekend in my judgment should be hired by the Department of Homeland Security during the week in a civilian capacity in order to employ their military planning skills in meeting the civilian-led planning requirement of the task force. So you take guardsmen who have been trained as planners -- guardsmen who put their uniforms on during the weekend and who drill as members of the reserve component but who during the week carry over those planning skills under DHS employment and direction --

Q Direction.

MR. MCHALE: -- to achieve integrated planning at the state level. I believe that (audio break) military capabilities should be integrated into the task force through the regionally assigned defense coordinating officer -- the DCO who works for NORTHCOM. DHS could be plugged into the task force through the similarly assigned regional federal coordinating officer -- the FCO. The civilian portion of the task force would be invited to participate at the discretion of that state's governor so that you would have a combined civilian-military task force that would as its core element rely upon planners whose duties would closely resemble the precedent of the technician program that you cited. The reserve component would have a huge role to play obviously in the day-to-day activities and the success of an individual state's task force for emergency response. That becomes the focal point for integrating Washington's plans, the state's plans, the locality's plans into a unified effort and all of that is dependent upon the utilization of guardsmen much as we have utilized guardsmen for the technician program. What a great question.

Q Well, I can't take credit for personally coming up with that question. It actually came from among our group at ThreatsWatch and the Center for Threat Awareness so -- MR. MCHALE: I just think that creating that kind of point for planning unique -- (audio break) -- capable of reflecting the unique character and resources of that state is what's required in order to achieve a real integration of planning at all levels of government, public, and private sector. And at the heart of it are those planners who are trained by the National Guard but who become during the week civilian employees of DHS.

Q And related question -- kind of a follow-on to that -- the shared resources concept that you've spoken of essentially it's centered around the planners and the coordinators. My question is would it be possible or a good idea to consider, or does it already exist for civil service positions that are below the planner level that are boots on the ground type such as firefighters, search and rescue and expertise such as that?

MR. MCHALE: And -- I'm sorry, you're suggesting that their employment be in service of whom? I'm sorry. What agency or what --

Q For instance, someone who is recruited for the National Guard and trained in search and rescue operations whether it be a helicopter pilot or a medical technician and the like. Would it be possible to conceive of a program where they would be rolled into a civil service position at the ground level -- a boots on the ground level -- from day to day -- for instance, maybe working at a fire department or something of that nature rather than just the planners that you spoke of at the high level?

MR. MCHALE: The literal answer to your question is yes, it's possible. The follow-on question is would it be wise. And we do have to bear in mind that our men and women in military uniform have as their primary service

responsibility the -- their availability for deployment overseas in a war fighting role, and the fact is we do have a significant number of civilian first responders who are also drilling members of the reserve component. Frankly, I think that reflects a spirit of service. The very same characteristics of -- the very same character traits that would attract someone to be a first responder tend to attract that individual to military service.

But a solid citizen can only serve in one place at one time and so I think we would want to be careful not to become disproportionately dependent perhaps by design on guardsmen in a civilian first responder capacity because when the balloon goes up those individuals are called to active duty in the guard and other service components of the reserve, and quite often they deploy overseas. And when they deploy overseas that creates at least for the time being a hole in the civilian first responder capability.

So I think right now we've got a pretty good balance in terms of our ability to accommodate the dual responsibilities of the citizen soldier who is also a first responder but I'm not sure we'd want to design a system that would increase the number of first responders because now that our reserve component has become an operational as well as a strategic reserve, periodic deployment overseas is to be anticipated -- periodic absence from work as a result of that. We want to be careful that we not have too large a hole to fill when our first responders deploy as warriors.

Q Right. That's a -- that's an important and excellent perspective. Thank you, sir.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Thank you, sir. I know your time is short here with us today and we appreciate you being with us. Do you have any closing comments for us?

MR. MCHALE: Just I truly am -- it is awe-inspiring to see the kind of response that is now being executed by civilian first responders, National Guardsmen, and other military personnel in southern California. There's not a man or woman in uniform doing what he or she is doing because of a paycheck. Many of these individuals are putting themselves in harm's way for the protection of the rest of us, and when you see that kind of selfless sense of purpose it is inspiring.

You know, I look at what those men and women are doing. I look at what Lieutenant General Blum did. When it became clear that military forces might be needed to fight the fire, Lieutenant General Blum didn't wait to be asked. He decided that maybe it was time for a training mission for the C-130s in Wyoming and North Carolina to exercise their tanker capabilities and so under the authority of training he coordinated the immediate deployment of those tankers from North Carolina and Wyoming to southern California so that just in case they might be needed (audio break) hold those units on a training mission could rapidly be redeployed into an operating environment.

He was extraordinarily proactive in his judgment, noteworthy in his common sense, and as a result today while we speak we have those four aircraft plus two more out of the Air Force Reserve actively flying tanker missions in the San Diego area. General Blum's sense of purpose and commitment is shared by every other man or woman in military uniform nearly (audio break) thousand of whom are now fighting the fire in southern California.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Thank you very much, sir. Assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense, Mr. Paul McHale with us this morning for the Bloggers Roundtable. Thank you, sir, for being with us and hopefully we can speak again soon.

MR. MCHALE: I look forward to it. Thank you all very much.

LT. CMDR DEWALT: Thank you, sir.

END.